DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 030 UD 032 274

AUTHOR Baker, Amy J. L.; Soden, Laura M.

TITLE The Challenges of Parent Involvement Research. ERIC/CUE Digest Number 134.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-UD-98-4
ISSN ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 6p.
CONTRACT RR93002016
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Box 40, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027; toll-free phone: 800-601-4868 (free).
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Policy; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Literature Reviews; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; Research Design; *Research Methodology; Research Problems; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Most practitioners and researchers support the educational policy direction of increased parent involvement, but few agree about what constitutes effective involvement. This digest, based on a critical evaluation of over 200 research studies, briefly reviews findings from parent involvement research to date, discusses their validity and utility, and proposes critical questions for future researchers in the field to consider. While methodological limitations are prevalent in the majority of parent involvement research, the sound studies that do exist have consistently found strong parent involvement effects. The methodological limitations include use of nonexperimental design, lack of isolation of parent involvement effects, inconsistent definitions of parent involvement, and nonobjective measures of parent involvement. The literature does suggest the importance of these specific types of parental involvement, among others: (1) provision of a stimulating literacy and material environment; (2) high expectations and moderate levels of parental support and supervision; (3) appropriate monitoring of television viewing and homework completion; (4) participation in joint learning activities at home; (5) emphasis on effort over ability; and (6) autonomy promoting parenting practices. Recommendations are made for future research that overcomes the methodological limitations cited and focuses on better definitions of parental involvement and its effects. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

The Challenges to Parent Involvement Research.
ERIC/CUE Digest No. 134, April 1998

ED 419 030

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UD032274

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

Number 134, April 1998 EDO-UD-98-4 ISSN 0889 8049

THE CHALLENGES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH

Recent major legislation, such as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), has made parents' involvement in their children's education a national priority. School districts nationwide are being encouraged to reexamine their parent involvement policies and programs and to demonstrate innovative approaches in order to obtain Federal education dollars. In particular, eligibility for Title I funding, available to school districts in high poverty areas, is now contingent upon the development of "compacts" in which families and schools agree to assume mutual responsibility for children's learning: partnerships must be forged between homes, schools, and communities, requiring an unprecedented level of contact and communication between parents and educators (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

While most practitioners and researchers support the policy direction of increased parent involvement, few agree about what constitutes effective involvement. Confusion persists regarding the activities, goals, and desired outcomes of various parent involvement programs and policies. A major source of this confusion is the lack of scientific rigor in the research informing practice and policy. Because of this, less is known about parent involvement than commonly is assumed. Nonetheless, early studies suggesting the importance of parent involvement are treated as definitive, regardless of the equivocal nature of the data, and they are used to support the position that all types of parent involvement are important. Moreover, many programs and policies promoting parent involvement are not explicitly based on the evidence that does exist. Reliance on such compromised data may lead to unrealistic expectations of what parent involvement programs and practices actually are able to accomplish.

Fortunately, the current national policy agenda has created a window of opportunity for improving programs and practice through high quality research. Thus, this digest, which is based on a critical evaluation of over 200 research studies, briefly reviews findings from parent involvement research to date, discusses their validity and utility, and proposes critical questions for future researchers in the field to consider.

Research Findings to Date

Years of practice wisdom, theory, and related areas of research (i.e., the importance of the home literacy environment, parental stimulation of children's language development, security of the parent-child attachment relationship, and parent involvement in preschool and early intervention programs) strongly suggest that parents' involvement in their children's formal schooling is vital for their academic success, even though the research evidence is less than conclusive. While methodological limitations are prevalent in the majority of parent involvement research (described below), the sound studies that do exist have consistently found strong parent involvement effects. For example, Tizard, Schofield, and Hewison (1982) demonstrated the clear positive impact of parents' listening to their children read at home; Fantuzzo, Davis, and Ginsburg (1995) demonstrated that an intervention program that included a parent involvement component was clearly superior to another without one; and Rodick and Henggeler (1980) found that a parent involvement intervention was more advantageous for children than an in-school intervention. Moreover, the cumulative knowledge from existing studies suggests the importance of several other specific types of parent involvement, including the following:

- provision of a stimulating literacy and material environment (Snow et al., 1991),
- high expectations and moderate levels of parental suport and supervision (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995),
- appropriate monitoring of television viewing and homework completion (Clark, 1993),
- participation in joint learning activities at home (Tizard et al., 1982),
- an emphasis on effort over ability (Stevenson, 1983), and
- autonomy promoting parenting practices (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991).

There is mounting evidence that each of these parent involvement variables facilitates children's academic achievement. There are also indications that they do so in relatively complex ways that interact with family background and social context variables such as ethnicity, family structure, maternal employment status, socioeconomic status, and gender (Schiamberg & Chin, 1986; Milne, 1989; Tocci & Englehard, 1991; Zimilies & Lee, 1991; Lee & Croninger, 1994). Continuing to determine the ways that various types of parent involvement positively affect student achievement in different contexts should be a major research priority in the field. Further, to have greater confidence in the findings of such studies, higher quality research must be conducted.

Methodological Limitations in Existing Research

Despite the validity of some studies, much parent involvement research to date contains serious methodological flaws, which results in a lack of confidence in their findings and limits their accuracy and usefulness. In general, flaws in existing research fall into four areas: use of non-experimental design, lack of isolation of parent involvement effects, inconsistent definitions of parent involvement, and non-objective measures of parent involvement.

ED 423 074

Use of Non-Experimental Design

Many of the field studies examining the impact of parent involvement on children's achievement employ non-experimental designs which are too weak to allow for confidence in their findings. These designs—as compared to true experiments—do not contain the controls necessary for researchers to conclude that parent involvement is the cause of enhanced student performance. Thus, alternative explanations, other than parent involvement, cannot be ruled out. For example, one common alternative explanation rarely ruled out in such non-experimental designs is that the children in the parent involvement program were better students to begin with than were those not in the program. In such cases, these children would have performed better academically regardless of the parent involvement intervention. Only with a true experiment can it be ascertained with certainty that improved student achievement is due to parent involvement.

Lack of Isolation of Parent Involvement Effects

Separation of the effects of parent involvement from that of the involvement of other adults. Many studies did not isolate the effect of parent involvement from the benefits of extra assistance in learning. For example, in many studies, children in a parent involvement intervention were compared with children not receiving the intervention, and improvements in achievement were identified as benefits of parent involvement. Drawing such a conclusion is based on the consensus in the field that parent involvement programs have their impact not only through specific learning activities, but through changes in a network of interrelated family factors (i.e., home environment, parental expectations for their children's performance, increased cognitive stimulation) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The studies did not rule out an alternative explanation: that children's performance would improve after they received extra assistance from any adult.

Separation of the effects of parent involvement from that of other intervention components. Researchers sometimes concluded that parent involvement was *the* critical factor in the success of an intervention program that offered a variety of concurrent activities, such as an educational curriculum for children or social services for the family. However, they failed to test the specific effects of parent involvement in analyses independent of the effects of other aspects of the program. Conclusions regarding the specific impact of parent involvement are not justified in such studies.

In fact, some studies have been able to isolate the specific effects of parent involvement. This suggests that certain research designs where a single parent involvement component is measured and related to a single child achievement outcome offer a feasible approach for examining the relationship among these individual variables. Similarly, when an intervention is comprised of a single component (e.g., parental participation in a workshop), assessing its effects allows for the isolation of the impact of parent involvement. However, in situations where a package of services is provided, as is the case with many comprehensive programs, participation in each program component must be measured separately in order to isolate and assess the specific effects of parental involvement.

Inconsistent Definitions of Parent Involvement

While many studies have measured the construct of parent involvement, few have operationalized it the same way. Some researchers have focused on attitudinal components of parent involvement by defining it as parental aspirations or expectations for the child's educational success. Other researchers have focused on behavioral aspects of parent involvement, such as assistance with homework or attendance at parent-teacher conferences. In other cases parent involvement was conceptualized as parenting style or family interaction patterns. Such differences in definitions and measurement of parent involvement make it difficult to assess cumulative knowledge across different studies.

Even when focusing on the same aspect of parent involvement, researchers operationalized it inconsistently. For example, while several studies have examined the impact of the quality of the home environment on children's academic achievement, rarely did two studies define home environment in the same way. In one, the home environment was measured as maternal involvement and responsiveness, avoidance of restriction, organized environment, play facilitation, and daily variety. Alternatively, another study defined the home environment as the number of parents in the home, the home library, reading at home, watching television, working on homework, absence from school, parent involvement, and family resources. While there is clearly a conceptual overlap between these two operationalizations of the home environment, they are nevertheless quite distinct: the former emphasizes the processes within the parent-child affective relationship that may impact student achievement while the latter emphasizes the family material and psychological resources allocated to children.

Equally problematic is the measurement of only a specific aspect of parent involvement (attitudes, behaviors, etc.) while discussing results in terms of the broader construct without acknowledging that only a portion of it was actually measured. When such generalizations are made about the effectiveness of parent involvement from data about a circumscribed aspect, conclusions may lead to unrealistic expectations.

Non-Objective Measures of Parent Involvement

Researchers frequently assessed parent involvement by the parent's (or some other informant's) report rather than by observation or objective measure. Thus, more is known about what parent say they do than about what they actually do. The bias in using subjective reports in parent involvement research should be a serious concern. Because parents, students, and teachers have a vested interest in reporting parents' behavior in a certain light, there may be distortions in the data collected. Lack of objective data becomes especially problematic when information about parent involvement and child achievement outcomes is reported by the same person; the result can be a distortion of the statistical relationships obtained, producing stronger correlations between the two than would otherwise be the case. Some researchers have attempted to increase the validity of self-report data by measuring parent involvement from more than one source (parent, teachers, students). However, this approach has resulted in low correspondence among the different respondents, indicating that one or both reports may have been inaccurate.

Self report measures of parent involvement have another drawback in that they tend to be closed-ended surveys that cannot fully capture the dynamic nature of parents' involvement in their children's education. When parents visit schools, meet with teachers, read to their school-aged children, and assist their children with homework, complex interactions are at work. Many of these processes could better be explored through open-ended and observational techniques, which would produce rich data, shed light on multifaceted interactions and relationships over time, and gener-

ate new hypotheses about the role of parent involvement.

Inaccuracy of Program Evaluations

Program evaluations may be the most challenging form of applied educational field research that exists. Unfortunately, they tend to be among the weaker parent involvement studies, plagued by many of the flaws described above. In addition to the general constraints of conducting research in an applied setting, program evaluations pose special obstacles for researchers because of the clinical and ethical issues involved in withholding treatment or wait-listing participants who clearly might benefit from the program (i.e., at-risk students, low-income families). Moreover, program evaluations often are funded from the larger program implementation budget, creating tensions between research and program needs. Therefore, most are conducted out of necessity, with a limited budget, and within the constraints of a service provider setting where the rigors of science often come second to the needs of the program being implemented.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future parent involvement studies must overcome the methodological limitations identified above in order to increase their accuracy and utility. Specifically, greater attention needs to be paid to several key issues in parent involvement research, related to both theory and methodology, in order for studies to identify with greater precision the types of involvement that have positive outcomes for students' achievement.

While increasing the rigor of parent involvement research in educational settings, researchers will also have to be more sensitive to the needs of parents and staff who may consider implementation of some of the more rigorous evaluation procedures intrusive and judgmental. Including parents in the development of measures and protocols may ease their concerns and also provide a mechanism for obtaining valuable input. In addition, funding allocations to program evaluations and applied educational research in general will need to increase. The resulting data will be more useful, justifying the cost, and it is possible that more effective parent involvement will generate cost savings by lessening the need for remedial and other special programs. In addition, researchers designing parent involvement studies need to take care that their presumptions are well-defined, their questions are clear, and their findings are unambiguous. To accomplish these goals, studies should embody the following characteristics:

Use of Experimental Procedures

Only one study design, the true experiment, adequately overcomes all the threats to internal validity problematic in educational research. The critical component of this design, random assignment to the control and experimental groups, rules out pre-test differences between groups, so that differences at post-test can be attributed to the independent variable—parent involvement, in this case—with confidence.

In order to conduct this type of study, a new level of partnership will need to be forged between practitioners and researchers to enable the use of experimental procedures in service settings, and program staff concerns related to random assignment and potentially intrusive data collection procedures will need to be addressed.

Isolation of the Effects of Parent Involvement

In order to truly understand and document the full impact of parent involvement, studies must separate parent involvement effects from related variables and from the impact of other adults involved in the program by: (1) specifically measuring a parent's involvement (i.e., type and level) separate from other components of the intervention in order to assess its independent impact on the identified outcomes, and (2) evaluating the differential influences of the content of a program and the deliverer (parent or other adult) of the program on outcomes.

Clarification of the Definition of Parent Involvement

Researchers must make explicit which aspect of involvement is being measured and how it fits into the broader construct of parent involvement in order to create a coherent understanding of the importance of different aspects of involvement. To ease researchers' ability to compare their findings with the work of others, and to build upon existing knowledge in a systematic fashion, researchers will need to develop and validate common instruments for measuring parent involvement across a variety of settings. Drawing on Epstein's (1994) six-item classification system—covering school-home communications, parent involvement in school and community, home learning activities, and parents as decision-makers—might prove useful for developing such a measurement, as it provides a widely accepted typology of parent involvement.

Objective Measurement of Parent Involvement

Studies must use techniques such as direct observation of parental behavior with standardized data collection tools, since self-report data can be unreliable.

Additional Study Design Improvements

The following issues also require further attention in parent involvement research:

Location of Parent Involvement. Research is needed to identify the unique and overlapping benefits of involvement at school and involvement in the home. It is clear from the existing knowledge base that involvement in these different ecological settings is not interchangeable, especially with respect to the barriers and goals of involvement.

Amount of Parent Involvement. The amount of involvement necessary to effect a positive impact on children needs to be identified. Questions regarding threshold effects of involvement (the minimum amount of involvement necessary to have an effect) and overload/ceiling effects (the saturation point of involvement) have yet to be adequately addressed. This is especially true for involvement at school, which may interact with other parental activities to increase parental stress and/or lead to overload. Thus, studies should attempt to determine the optimal amount of parent involvement.

Further, it has not yet been determined whether quantity is the appropriate scale for assessing involvement. Quality of involvement (between parent and teachers and between parents and their children) may be a more important dimension for assessing the impact of parent involvement. For example, if parents grudgingly read to their children, the effect may be more deleterious than their declining to do so.

Comprehensiveness of Parent Involvement. More research is needed to determine whether parents need to be involved in all aspects of a parent involvement program (planning, implementation, evaluation) in order for their involvement to be valid and beneficial. Currently, some

practitioners attempt to engage parents in all levels of school functioning or at all levels of implementation of a parent program within the school in the belief that the more comprehensive the involvement of parents, the greater the benefit to children's education. It may be that discrete and targeted types of involvement can also produce a positive impact.

Complexity of Involvement Patterns. Researchers need to take into account the complex and transactional nature of interrelationships between parent involvement and its outcomes. For example: (1) relationships among different types of parent involvement; (2) the relative importance of different aspects of parent involvement at different points in the life of the student; and (3) the complex processes by which different types of involvement interact to mediate, moderate, or suppress each other.

Ancillary Beneficiaries of Parent Involvement. Much remains to be learned about the impact of discrete parent involvement activities and particular beneficiaries, such as the parents themselves, families, schools, and communities. For example, the impact of involvement in their children's education on parents' literacy, self-esteem, and feelings about their children has yet to be explored and documented. Similar detailed questions remain to be explored about the effects on the community of an active parent involvement program within the district public schools.

Differential Gender Effects of Parent Involvement. It is important for research studies to consider from the outset the relationships between parent involvement and student achievement separated by gender. Indeed, the research studies that have done so suggest that the specific aspects of parent involvement considered—parental styles and parenting techniques—have different effects depending upon the gender of the child. For example, Lobel and Bempechat (1992) found that mothers with a high need for social approval had sons with high performance expectations, although their daughters were not similarly affected. Conversely, Phillips (1992) found that parents' goals for their children's educational achievement was a stronger predictor of achievement gains for girls than for boys, and that parents of girls had higher expectations for their children's educational achievement than parents of boys. In order to study gender differentials, research will need to generate hypotheses about which types of parent involvement are likely to have different outcomes for boys and girls.

—Amy J.L. Baker and Laura M. Soden,
National Council of Jewish Women Center for the Child

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Clark, R. (1993). Homework-focused parenting practices that positively affect student achievement. In N.F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*. Albany: SUNY University Press. (ED 367 449)

Comer, J. (1988, November). Educating poor minority children. *Scientific American, 259*(5), 42-48. (EJ 386 132)

Davies, D. (1991, January). Schools reaching out: Family, school, and community partnerships for student success. *Phi Delta Kappan, 72*(5), 376-380, 3822. (EJ 419 909)

Epstein, J. (1994). Theory to practice: School and family partnerships lead to school improvement and student success. In C.L. Fagnano & B.Z. Werber (Eds.), *School, family, and community interaction: A view from the firing lines*. Boulder: Westview.

Fantuzzo, J., Davis, G., & Ginsburg, M. (1995). Effects of parent involvement in isolation or in combination with peer tutoring on student self-concept and mathematics achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 87*, 272-281. (EJ 509 338)

Gordon, I. (1978). *The effects of parent involvement on schooling*. Paper presented at the annual conference of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, San Francisco, CA.

Kurdek, L., Fine, M., & Sinclair, R. (1995, April). School adjustment in sixth graders: Parenting transitions, family climate and peer norm effects. *Child Development, 66*(2), 430-445. (EJ 503 709)

Lamborn, S., Mounts, N., Steinberg, L., & Dornbusch, S. (1991, October). Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful families. *Child Development, 62*(5), 1049-1065. (EJ 436 489)

Lee, V., & Croninger, R. (1994, May). The relative importance of home and school in the development of literacy skills for middle-grade students. *American Journal of Education, 102*(3), 286-329. (EJ 492 293)

Lobel, T., & Bempechat, J. (1992, December). Socialization of achievement: Influence of mothers' need for approval on children's achievement cognitions and behavior. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*(4), 529-536. (EJ 456 645)

Milne, A. (1989). Family structure and the achievement of children. In W. Wiston (Ed.), *Education and the American family*. Albany: SUNY University Press.

Phillips, L. (1992). *Parent involvement: Relationships of expectations, goals, and activities to student achievement among minority, socioeconomic, and gender groups*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA. (ED 353 065)

Rodick, J.D., & Henggeler, S. (1980, December). The short-term and long-term amelioration of academic and motivational deficiencies among low-achieving inner-city adolescents. *Child Development, 51*(4), 1126-1132. (EJ 246 091)

Schiamberg, L., & Chin, C. (1986). *The influence of family on educational and occupational achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Philadelphia, PA.

Snow, C., Barnes, W., Chandler, J., Goodman, I., & Hemphill, L. (1991). *Unfulfilled expectations: Home and school influences on literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (ED 356 303)

Stevenson, H. (1983). *Making the grade: School achievement in Japan, Taiwan, and the United States*. Presentation made at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Science, Board of Trustees, Stanford, CA. (ED 356 823)

Tizard, J., Schofield, W., & Hewison, J. (1982, February). Collaboration between teachers and parents in assisting children's reading. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 52*, 1-15. (EJ 264 773)

Tocci, C.M., & Englehard, G. (1991, May-June). Achievement, parental support, and gender differences in attitudes toward mathematics. *Journal of Educational Research; 84*(5), 280-286. (EJ 430 606)

United States Department of Education. (1994). *Strong families, strong schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. (ED 371 909)

Zimilies, H., & Lee, V. (1991,March). Adolescent family structure and educational progress. *Developmental Psychology, 27*(2), 314-320.

This digest is based on an in-depth review of research studies, *Parent Involvement in Children's Education: A Critical Assessment of the Knowledge Base*, by Amy J.L. Baker and Laura M. Soden, prepared for the National Council of Jewish Women Center for the Child, New York, NY.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research andImprovement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002016. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE